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POLITICAL AND MILITARY

1. Arévalo Returns: Military Coup Ousts Ydígoras

With the clandestine return of presidential candidate Juan José ARÉVALO late last week, pressure that had been building up blew the top right off the political thermometer. The Guatemalan Army took matters into its own hands and quickly, quietly and bloodlessly ousted President Miguel YDIGORAS Fuentes late the night of March 30.

As both the military, with State of Siege powers, and the anti-Communist parties made preparations to block Arévalo's announced March 31 return (Weeka No. 13), the leftist, anti-American ex-President sneaked into the country early and held a secret press conference in Guatemala City the night of March 29. This was publicized the morning of March 30. Then followed equivocal comments on Arévalo's return by Ydígoras and official candidate Roberto Alejos and the revelation that the press conference had probably been held in the house of an Ydígoras crony. Colonel Enrique Peralta, Minister of Defense, who had been under pressure from both his military colleagues and the nation's anti-Arévalo and anti-Government parties to take over and thus balk Arévalo's ambitions, finally gave in. At approximately 11:00 p.m. March 30, Army troops moved on the Casa Crema. A three-officer committee gave President Ydígoras the word, and within minutes he had his wife were bundled off to the airport. They were exiled to Nicaragua the following morning in a Government airplane. Sunday morning awakening Guatemalans (few had been much disturbed by short bursts of gunfire that had accompanied the takeover) were greeted with radio bulletins announcing that the Army, seeing public order threatened and the country endangered by the infiltration of Communists attempting to take power, had found it necessary to assume control of the Government. Colonel Peralta, as the ranking military man, assumed the position of head of Government. Arévalo, the cause of all the trouble, disappeared from sight shortly after his press conference and has not been heard of since. The Embassy was informed by an Arevalist source that he returned to Tapachula, Mexico, although this report has not yet been confirmed.

Comment: The coup had been abuilding for some time. Arévalo's return in defiance of the Army's vow to block him, combined with nagging suspicions that Ydígoras may have been maneuvering with Arévalo principally to foster the candidacy of Presidential confidant Roberto Alejos and a general dissatisfaction with inefficiency and alleged corruption in the Government, all contributed to Peralta's decision to act. He had been assured of solid Army support.

Basically, what has happened in Guatemala is that the more responsible elements (neither principally nor solely conservative) sincerely believed that the country faced a threat from Communism and took action to assure it would not again be taken over by the likes of Arévalo and Arbenz. They apparently felt that Arévalo could not be beaten in an election (except

possibly through the unacceptable alternative of the imposition of the official candidate) and that an attempt to block Arévalo after the election, in a Peru-type action, would likely result in civil war. In view of these real fears and the equivocal actions and statements of Ydígoras, the ousting of a generally considered venal and Machiavellian president seemed to have been the only course left to the anti-Communist, anti-Arévalo forces. (CONFIDENTIAL)

2. Constitution Suspended, Congress Dissolved, Eventual Elections

In bulletins following the ouster of Ydígoras, the Peralta Government announced that the Constitution was suspended until order and stability were returned; the Congress was dissolved; international agreements would be respected; political party activity was suspended; and the government would work to establish a climate conducive to the institution of progressive measures beneficial to rural and other workers and to achieve a democratic, anti-Communist government so that power could, when possible, be relinquished to legally elected officials. (Embtel 606).

In its first two "decree laws" the GOG reiterated the validity of the Labor Code (Embtel A-606) and established a commission to investigate alleged mishandling and embezzlement of public funds by officials of the Ydígoras administration. (OFFICIAL USE ONLY)

Comment: The Government has not yet mentioned the possible timing of elections, but the general pronouncements on the subject to date are hopeful signs that it does not intend to perpetuate itself. Major candidates Embassy officers have talked to on the subject believe that 24 months for the installation of a new President would be a grudging maximum acceptable period, while 18 months would be preferable and desirable if everything goes well. They have also discussed the possibility of convoking a Constitutional Convention within six months to one year. (CONFIDENTIAL)

The consensus of everyone save the Arevalistas seems to be that it was a good thing Ydígoras left and that the military Government, if temporary and if effective in cleaning up corruption and bringing stability and a measure of progress to Guatemala, was by far preferable to the continuance of the previous situation. The general reaction seems to be best described as relief that the uncertainty of the past few months was over. There were considerable expectations that the new Government would maintain order and create a climate conducive to progress as it has promised. This feeling seems to extend to the so-called man in the street.

3. New Cabinet Named

As one of his first orders of business, Peralta named a Cabinet of three military officers and six civilians. (Embtel 607) Alberto HERRARTE Gonzalez, a competent if not brilliant lawyer and foreign affairs specialist (formerly Ambassador to Costa Rica, Brazil and the UN), was chosen as Minister of Foreign Relations; almost universally popular ex National Deputy

Carlos Enrique PERALTA Mendez (nephew of the new head of Government) heads the Ministry of Economy and Central American Integration; the former Sub-Secretary of Labor, Jorge José SALAZAR Valdez, was given the Ministry of Labor with the approval of the leaders of the Consejo Sindical de Guatemala. Military officers fill the posts of Minister of Government (Colonel Luis Max SERRANO); Education (Colonel Rolando CHINCHILLA); and Finance (incumbent Major Jorge LUCAS Caballeros). (OFFICIAL USE ONLY)

Comment: Although this cannot be considered a "blue ribbon" Cabinet, comments on the appointments have generally been favorable. It appears that Peralta chose relatively capable collaborators rather than military cronies or political figures. (CONFIDENTIAL)

4. Recognition of New Government

Chiefs of Mission were invited informally to meet April 1 with the Under Secretary of Foreign Relations. Most of them, including the Dean (Papal Nuncio), appeared. Kestler Farnes told them of the Army's action, that it had been necessary to stop Communism and avert chaos and civil war. He said developments had been at once lamentable and fortunate: the former because the country had to find a way out of its difficulties in an extra-legal fashion; fortunate because necessary remedial action had been taken. He said Guatemala hoped to continue to maintain friendly relations with all powers represented here. Subsequently, the new Foreign Minister sent a note to the various Embassies conveying substantially the same message. As of early April 5, only two countries, Switzerland and Haiti, had notified the Ministry they were resuming relations with the new Goverhment.

Comment: The Government headed by Col. Peralta appears to have an extraordinarily wide base of support. Indeed there is an air of relief and even euphoria among the substantial and productive elements of the society. Hopes to beat the noxious Arévalo, either at the polls or by barring him from the country, were dashed first by the emergence of Roberto Alejos as the official candidate, which sealed the hopeless disarray of anti-Arevalism, and second by Arévalo's slipping into the country in spite of elaborate precautions and express determination to bar him. The electorate was faced with a choice of either Arévalo or unacceptable "continuismo" in the person of Alejos. The Army was convinced, moreover, that Arévalo had sneaked in with the tacit approval of President Ydígoras, the latter either expecting to use him as a pawn to assure Alejos' victory or permitting him to win. Public expressions of support and offers to collaborate have come from practically all the fuerzas vivas, i.e., associations of agricultural producers, industrialists and businessmen. The recent popularly-elected Mayor, Francisco MONTENEGRO Sierra, together with most of the City Council and a dozen or so auxiliary mayors of the various sections of the Capital, have publicly endorsed the Army's action as necessary. So far as can be determined, organized labor, although naturally not enthusiastic about a military government, have either privately endorsed events or have not criticized them. An exception, of course, is the Communist-dominated FASGUA. Students, both University

and Secondary, cannot be expected to publicly support the Government but have not called for violence. Many are jubilant that Ydígoras has gone. A moderately impressive public manifestation of support for the new Government was held in front of the National Palace the afternoon of April 3. Upwards of 15,000 people, many of them campesinos brought in from the fincas but also large numbers of ordinary citizens and middle and upper-class elements of the Capital, heard Col. Peralta and other Government spokesmen pledge an honest administration and one aimed at securing and increasing social and economic reforms.

The new Government issued Decree Law No. 1 which continued in effect the Labor Code and guaranteed the rights of workers. The Embassy understands it is about to issue another decree guaranteeing the rights and subsidies of the University of San Carlos. Expected momentarily is the publication of a "Letter of Guarantees" to establish norms of Government and guarantee civil rights. The Embassy has been informed this Charter will reestablish the bulk of the provisions of the Constitution of 1956, restricting, altering or suppressing only those provisions the Government considers prejudicial to combatting Communism. The Government probably would be agreeable to a statement it intended to hold elections within a year-and-a-half or two years.

It has been reported that El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua may recognize the Government April 6 and that Canada and the United Kingdom will act early next week. Certain European powers are waiting for us to move.

B-5

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